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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2361
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2668
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000750

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DEPT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/PI, ECA/FO
DRL FOR KRAMER/BARKS-RUGGLE/BARGHOUT
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OVP FOR HANNAH AND KAREM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2018
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: INDEPENDENT SHIA SAY DOHA HAS A DOWNSIDE

REF: BEIRUT 00710

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Shortly after returning from their protracted visit to Washington, three members of the independent Shia delegation organized by Lokman Slim told the Charge that the Doha agreement has serious, negative, and long-term consequences for the independent Shia movement. According to Slim, the Lebanese people need to ask some tough questions about Doha, but many are afraid to do so. Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) Vice President Duraid Yaghi, whose Bekaa Valley home was attacked with explosives and gunfire during his absence, told us the new electoral districting agreement "gave all 10 parliamentary seats in the Bekaa and Hermel to Hizballah." In coordination with a MEPI-funded International Republican Institute (IRI) program, the independent Shia have begun to formulate a strategic plan for both domestic and regional programs, including possible outreach to Israeli contacts. Initial suggestions for USG partnership activities will be sent septel. End Summary.

Personal Attack in the Bekaa, Eerie Quiet in Dahiyeh

2.(C) On May 21, the Charge hosted a dinner at her residence for Lokman Slim, Duraid Yaghi, and Inga Schei. They had just recently returned from their visit to Washington, which was extended when Hizballah militants closed down Beirut International Airport (BIA) on May 7. Slim's wife, Monika Borgmann, also attended, in addition to IRI Country Director Sean Walsh, IRI strategic communications consultant Chris Reid, and Special Assistant.

13. (C) Duraid Yaghi, the Vice President of Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, told us that his home in the Bekaa Valley had been attacked during the recent violence. His home was targeted with two explosive devices. One detonated and lit his garden on fire. The other did not explode, but landed right next to the fuel supply for his generator. He also told us that militants fired guns into his bedroom while his wife was in the residence. Though he does not want the attack to become widely known, Yaghi told us that the forensic evidence has been preserved and he will "shortly know exactly who did this."

14. (C) Yaghi also briefed us on the plight of Sayyed Ali Al

Amine, the Mufti of South Lebanon (reftel). Apparently, the Mufti's remaining family members were ordered to leave Tyre. Walid Jumblatt confirmed that he had offered the Mufti and his family sanctuary in the Chouf mountains, although their departure was made difficult when family's driver was attacked and the family was harassed at Hizballah checkpoints as they left the south. Yaghi also told us that another of the Mufti's sons had been "reassigned" out of an elite (and cushy) position with the parliamentary guard force. Slim said the Shia must celebrate Al Amine's courage, not portray him as a victim, and think carefully on how to reposition him as an influential figure in the independent Shia struggle.

¶15. (C) Monika Borgmann, a filmmaker and NGO activist, had remained in the Slim family home in Shia-dominated southern Beirut suburb of Dahiyeh during the recent outbreak of violence. She told us that there was an eerie calm throughout the Hizballah controlled neighborhood. There was an increase of "patrols" by cars with blacked-out license plates, but she found the gangs of teenage boys in the streets even more disturbing. "They aren't in school, they are hanging around and they are extremely vulnerable to recruitment." She also told us about the celebratory gunfire that erupted in the neighborhood on May 14, the night the Siniora government revoked the two controversial cabinet decisions. "It was much more than we saw at the end of the July 2006 war. They were elated....and that was the first time I really became frightened."

"We've Come Home to a New Playing Field"

¶16. (C) Slim is deeply concerned about the ramifications of the Doha agreement, saying the political environment has drastically shifted. "The Lebanese are not asking tough questions about the Doha deal. Most are afraid and still others are just fed up. Besides, with the media controlled by either March 14 or March 8, how can independent dissenting voices be heard?"

¶17. (C) He is also deeply disturbed that Hizballah managed to keep discussion of its arms off the agenda and out of the final statement. "We now have to live with these weapons and someone should hold March 14 accountable for allowing that to happen." He also said an inherent weakness of March 14 was exposed when "the leadership was brought to its knees with one single blow from Hizballah. There was no ground swell of people who came out in the streets to back up the March 14 leaders when they came under attack. It shows that their political base is extremely shallow."

¶18. (C) Slim is most critical about the electoral districts which were agreed upon in Doha, where the independent Shia had no voice. Other Lebanese political figures, including Walid Jumblatt, agree that without proportional representation, the independent Shia have been left with very few options for the 2009 parliamentary elections. Slim and Yaghi agree that "Hizballah was given the 10 seats in Baalbek and Hermel on a silver platter." Asked if he would run again for a parliamentary seat in order to at least "post a percentage of anti-Hizballah votes," Yaghi told us he is willing to make a stand, but in light of the attack on his home, it was unlikely and was a decision he would have to consider carefully with his family. "The elections in 2005 were 'dirty' and Hizballah is even more aggressive on the ground now."

¶19. (C) Slim and Yaghi also agree that the new electoral districts have "cut the rug out from under Ahmed al Assad. There is no way, given the current districting, that he could win in Hasbaya and Marjayeoun now."

¶10. (C) The door may remain open in five parliamentary districts, including Zahle, Bint Jbeil, Baabda and Zahrani. Yaghi and Slim agree that there may be a chance to "maneuver" in these areas as individual March 14 members jockey for position and reconsider their existing alliances. "But success is by no means guaranteed."

Hizballah PR Machine Continues To Be Its Greatest Weapon

¶11. (C) UN contacts had told Special Assistant on May 21 that downtown retail owners had been approached by Hizballah and asked to provide estimates for lost revenue during the 18 month sit-in/tent city. UN contacts believe that Hizballah plans to offer financial compensation to the retail owners in a bid to erase "hard feelings."

¶12. (C) Slim, Borgmann, and Yaghi confirmed that they had also been told that Hizballah had approached the Beirut municipality with an offer to pay for any and all infrastructure damage caused by the tent city. The work, which may include repavement of the roads, repairs to water mains, etc., will likely be completed by Jihad al Bina, a Hizballah-controlled construction company.

¶13. (C) Slim also told us that the recent events were "playing well" amongst the rural Shia, who consider Hizballah's victory to be aided by divine intervention. "They are beginning to sound messianistic, as they did after the 2006 war." The reaction is mixed among the suburban and urban Shia, whose lives were more disrupted by the violence. "Many are now 'confused' by Hizballah's use of arms against Lebanese citizens. Some are reevaluating their opinion that Hizballah is solely a resistance force against Israel."

¶14. (C) Slim believes Hizballah's PR machine will go into overdrive to prove that its actions finally brought about a resolution to the political crisis in Lebanon. "Its military might was virtually unchallenged and they will say that they 'chose' peace because they care deeply about the Lebanese nation." According to Reid, the discipline of Hizballah's messaging will once again highlight the divided opinions within March 14.

Amal Is "Finished"

¶15. (C) Slim went on to tell us that Hizballah had used Amal militants to do much of the dirty work during the recent violence. It was undisciplined and inexperienced Amal fighters who were seen as the bullies, while the sophisticated Hizballah senior fighters stayed behind the scenes. "Amal is finished. They had been losing ground for a long time and Hizballah played them perfectly. Amal attacked the Mufti of South Lebanon, among other things, but it is Hizballah that returned from Doha with the political victories." Slim doubts Amal will be given a significant number of opposition cabinet seats in the new government, but Hizballah may try to reward "new friends" who performed admirably, such as the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP). Yaghi told us that, like Hizballah, SSNP fighters are trained and highly-disciplined. Multi-confessional, SSNP may start to attract a wider range of followers.

And Now Is The Time To Spotlight Aoun's Failures

¶16. (C) Slim said now is the time to show Aoun as a loser in this latest power struggle driven and managed solely by Hizballah. Astute political observers will note that Aoun was used and, in the end, his partnership with Hizballah did not gain more advantages for the Lebanese Christians. Slim says, "Sources tell us privately that Aoun is seething with anger." FPM may well be facing internal divisions when the fallout of Doha becomes clear.

¶17. (C) IRI's Reid, who works with March 14 leaders on strategic communication, cautioned that an attack on Aoun could backfire with moderate Christians if not properly orchestrated. He believes Aoun should be portrayed as subservient and a leader without enough power to truly deliver for his constituencies. "And let Aoun do it to himself. Given his ego, he will likely overcompensate in the press to prove himself -- and this won't go over well." Reid

also believes that when Christians begin to really imagine what Lebanon will be like under Hizballah control, they will turn against Aoun.

¶18. (C) Like Amal, the composition of the new cabinet will have significant implications on Aoun's strength. Yaghi and Reid agree that Aoun may not be allocated a large number of ministries and perhaps not the "quality" ones he is looking for.

Looking to the Future: A Regional Approach

¶19. (C) Slim and Yaghi told us that discussions in Washington prompted them to begin formulating a more ambitious regional approach for the future.

¶20. (C) They would like to begin slow, careful and strategic partnerships with independent Shia in the region beginning with Iraq. "There are a lot of key Iraqi figures who share our philosophies and we would like to work bilaterally with them before branching out to other communities in the region." Slim would like to develop an "independent Shia Council" and he and Yaghi feel they have the ideal candidate to chair the organization. Sheikh Ayad Jamaledine, is an Iraqi-Lebanese "black turbaned Sayyed, which signifies he is a descendent of the Prophet." Currently residing in Najaf, Iraq, Slim describes him as a charismatic, highly-educated, well-respected, young energetic leader with family ties in the Bekaa Valley. "He could easily succeed Nasrallah as the leader of the Lebanese Shia. He is courageous, tough on Syria when need be, and he speaks his mind." Slim and Yaghi would also like to reach out to Iraqi National Security Advisor Muwafaq al Ruba'i, who they view as another potential ally.

¶21. (C) Slim also surprised us by expressing a desire to reach out to not only like-minded Syrian citizens, but also Israelis. "There is much that we will disagree on, but I am convinced that there is plenty of common ground that can be built upon." Slim told us he had met with a former Netanyahu advisor while in Washington and agreed to begin a dialogue with this individual. For the Israeli proposal, Slim is keen to follow up on discussions with the Aspen Institute, which offered to develop the concept operationally.

But We Need to Focus Immediately on the Needs in Lebanon

¶22. (C) Slim and Yaghi insisted that now, more than ever, the independent Shia need USG support. We have heard this repeatedly and have asked them for more concrete definitions of support, as we believe their on-the-ground experience will be the most useful guide for strategic planning. IRI's Sean Walsh is working to put some of the Shia ideas into concrete proposals, which we will forward septel. The Charge has also asked Slim to gather a group to meet with EmbOffs (MEPI, AID, PD, and OTI) for a brainstorming session.

Comment

¶23. (C) The delegation was extremely pleased with their discussions in Washington with USG officials. The Doha agreement has disappointed them, but they tell us they are still ready to stand up for the rights of the independent Shia.

SISON